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THE EARLIEST FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY MOVEMENT IN WASHINGTON, 1849-1874.

By W. DAWSON JOHNSTON.

(Read before the Society, January 9, 1905.)

Influenced by the establishment of the Boston Public Library, Mr. George Watterston, former Librarian of Congress, on the tenth of February, 1849, published a letter in the *National Intelligencer* urging the establishment of a free public library. "It has struck me," said he, "that this very desirable object could be obtained by calling upon the citizens to make a small contribution towards its formation in money or books, as might best suit their convenience. A room in the City Hall sufficiently spacious might be assigned for this purpose, and the nucleus of a large and valuable public library immediately formed. There is at present what is called a City Library, owned by private stockholders, to which I believe none have access but those who own stock in it. From my knowledge of the liberality and public spirit of those gentlemen I feel assured that they would not hesitate to aid in the accomplishment of so useful an object by placing their library gratuitously, or for a small equivalent, in the hands of the corporation for the purpose I have mentioned. This would form an admirable foundation for an extensive library, which might be increased from year to year by donations or purchase, till it became a library creditable to the nation as well as the metropolis. The want of such an institution, I need scarcely say, is seriously felt by citizens as well as strangers, who, if at all literary, often find themselves considerably at a loss to pass

away pleasantly and profitably the heavy hours they may be constrained to pass in our city. I trust the Councils will take this object into consideration, and that some movement will be speedily made to effect so useful and important an object."

The subject was again brought forward in the *Intelligencer*, June 8, by one who signed himself "Pioneer." No city, he said, was better supplied with valuable books than Washington. But these were available to the public only for purposes of reference and at such hours as made their use impracticable, so that citizens were as little benefited by them generally as residents of the most distant state. At the same time, he continued, citizens of Washington were great book lovers: their own collections and the patronage of the book-stores was evidence of that; and a small fraction of the amount expended for books and literary intelligence would furnish a collection for public benefit on a liberal scale. A subscription of ten dollars by each gentleman in the government office would make possible the erection of a building large enough to accommodate not only a library and reading room but also offices, the revenue from which might be sufficient for the maintenance of the institution. The basement and first floor, he thought, might be given up to offices and dwellings, while the second floor should be devoted to the library, reading room and lecture hall in front, with rooms for literary clubs, art studios, etc., in the rear. The collection of books could be made with even less difficulty. Every man had useful books, which, if placed before the public, would be useful to others. Let every subscriber to the proposed library have the privilege of paying one half of his subscription in books at the appraisal of a board or committee. In this way alone several thousand volumes might be collected, and

their usefulness, now circumscribed to a single family, be indefinitely extended. The purchasers of a new work would, after reading it, offer it to the public through the library. In connection with the library there should be a reading room furnished with the most valuable newspapers, magazines and scientific journals. The privileges of the association should be open to all the citizens of Washington on equal terms, shares being not more than five dollars each, and transferable.

Mr. Watterston's suggestion for a free public library was preferred to the suggestion put forward by "Pioneer," and at a meeting of the citizens of Washington, presided over by Mr. Watterston (October 9, 1849) it was

"Resolved, That a committee of seven (one from each ward) be appointed to prepare a suitable plan for a public library, to be established in this city; That they be authorized to make application to the stockholders of the City Library, to ascertain upon what terms they will agree to transfer their respective shares of stock for the purpose above mentioned; that they be requested to solicit donations of money, books, maps, etc., of the citizens of Washington, and of other cities, to add to said library, and to apply to the city Councils for the use of a room in the City Hall, and also for an appropriation for the gradual increase of the library, and the payment of a competent person to take charge thereof."

The following persons were appointed the committee, viz., George Watterston, Peter Force, C. J. Abbot, J. W. Maury, P. R. Fendall, Dr. Roberts, Dr. J. E. Morgan, and on motion, C. A. Davis.*

At a meeting of this committee on the same evening it was

"Resolved, That a subcommittee of three be appointed, whose duty it shall be to wait on the Directors of the Washington library, and request a meeting of the Directors, or of

* *National Intelligencer*, October 17, 1849.

the Stockholders, as the said Directors may deem best, for the purpose of ascertaining whether the said Directors or Stockholders will consent to transfer the property of the said library company to such managers, directors or others, as may hereafter be appointed, for the establishment of a Free Public Library in this city, provided assurances can be given that the same shall be held and preserved for the purposes and uses of a Free Public Library, as aforesaid, and also the terms and conditions upon which such transfer can be made."

Messrs. George Watterston, Abbot and Davis were appointed the committee, and the resolution communicated by the chairman of the committee, Mr. Watterston, to the Directors of the Washington Library Company. In reply to this communication the Directors passed a resolution (October 30) asking for information regarding the plans for the new library, its management and support, and inquiring what assurance could be given that the new library would be established upon as firm and permanent a basis as that of the Washington Library.* On the following day this resolution was communicated to Mr. Watterston by Mr. James F. Haliday, secretary of the company, with his personal assurance that the members of the Library Company would cheerfully unite with their fellow citizens in any measures for the establishment of a free library upon a basis equitable, certain and permanent.† The sixth of November a committee consisting of Messrs. Brodhead, Anderson and Sessford was appointed to confer with the Citizens' Committee regarding the proposed free library. On the twenty-third of November Mr. Watterston addressed a second letter to the citizens of Washington repeating his arguments of February 10, and, on the sixth of February, 1850, Mr. Joseph C. Smith made a statement to the directors

* "Journal of the Washington Library Company," October 30, 1849.

† Watterston manuscripts.

of a plan to transfer the Washington Library to the city authorities, the nature of which is not described.* With this the plan for the reestablishment of the Washington Library as a free public library disappeared.

After the failure of the Watterston movement little was done to secure a public library in Washington until after the war. That little was done by newspaper correspondents. In May, 1850, a correspondent of the *Republic* suggested that every ward in the city should have a large well-lighted, well-ventilated reading room and library, where youths should be welcomed and respectfully treated by the librarian, upon the single condition that no word should be spoken.

In October, 1850, Mr. Smith made similar proposals with a view to inaugurating his scheme for the School and School District American Institute. This scheme, set forth at some length in the *National Intelligencer*, October 19, 1850, provided for a free library and reading room, such as those in Massachusetts and New York, in each school district in the United States. The people of Scotland, of the Presbyterian Church, had free use of the libraries appended to each church: would not the addition of a library to each church in the District of Columbia, he urged, be greatly beneficial to the members of said churches, and promote the establishment of such libraries in each district.

There was only one more suggestion of a public library before the war. In 1854 it was said that Mr. W. W. Corcoran was erecting a handsome and substantial building on H Street between Thirteenth and Fourteenth for a Mechanics' Library.† But this appears to have been mere rumor: for in 1857 the *Union*

* "Journal," February 6, 1850.

† *Republic*, May 2, August 29, September 7, 1850.

‡ *Union*, November 9, 1854.

(December 5) complained that the building had been monopolized by a society, and that those who wanted books were still forced to beg members of Congress to obtain them from the Library of Congress, directly in opposition to the rules of that institution.

The more conservative and respectable citizens believed that no other public library than the Washington Library was needed;* others were content to remain dependent upon the charity of benevolent Congressmen; all became more and more absorbed in political debate and military events.

The Earliest Congressional Measures.

After the War the free public library movement entered a second phase. The question was now taken up in Congress. The events which led to Congressional action were these: On the fourteenth of April, 1865, President Lincoln was assassinated in Ford's theater; on the sixteenth of July a Government clerk wrote to the *Chronicle* suggesting that a free library would be the noblest and most appropriate monument to the great martyr that could be raised on the spot where he had offered up his life for the cause of universal freedom, and urging that a memorial be addressed to Congress, asking for an appropriation for the purchase and fitting up of Ford's theater as a library and lecture-room for the use of the civil employees of the government. For the maintenance of the library, said he, "Let a tax of one dollar a month be imposed upon each government employee whose salary amounts to \$1,200 per year, and upon all others in like proportion to the amount they receive."

This suggestion was discussed by the *Chronicle* in a long editorial on the following day. It made no refer-

* *Telegraph*, April 29, 1852.

ence to the old Washington Library; it described the Library of Congress as out of the way and never open in the evening. In short, it thought a public library more needed in Washington than in any other city in the country. The editor of the *Chronicle* did not, however, approve of the suggestion that the clerks be taxed in order to support the institution. The establishment of such an institution he believed, should be left either to the subscriptions of interested individuals or for the action of Congress.

"Congress," he continued, "refused last winter to appropriate a few thousand dollars for the increase of pay to the clerks, on the ground, we believe, that a general increase of pay would be an unmerited favor in most cases, however much it might be deserved in a few instances. This objection does not apply to the present case. If Congress would now appropriate a sufficient sum to purchase Ford's theater and fit it up for a library and lecture-room, it might rest assured that the benefit for the money would accrue only to those who really deserve it; for none but men of really literary tastes would enjoy a library, and there is no doubt that the men of education and culture are the best and most useful clerks.

"The building being purchased and fitted up, the books could be easily procured. The employees of the Government have friends all over the country, who would gladly contribute to a fund for the purchase of books. A public library in Washington is a matter, too, of more than local importance. Its benefits would be shared to some extent by the whole country, and we venture to say that the improvement in the intellectual culture and the personal habits of the clerks in the Departments, which it would produce, would be no small item in the amount to balance the appropriation. . . . In the regular army, very many companies and garrisons had libraries for the use of the private soldiers, and there is no reason why, under more favorable circumstances, the Department clerks should not accomplish the same object on a larger scale."

This discussion regarding the Lincoln memorial came to nothing, Ford's theater being devoted by the Act of April 7, 1866, to the storage of the army records and museum.

On the fourteenth of December, 1866, however, Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts introduced the following bill* into Congress. This failed to become a law, but it is of interest as the first legislative movement in favor of a free public library in Washington, the only one in fact that marked the decade between the war and the Centennial of 1876.

39TH CONGRESS, 2D SESSION. S. 472. IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES. DECEMBER 14, 1866.

Mr. Wilson asked, and by unanimous consent obtained, leave to bring in the following bill; which was read twice, ordered to lie on the table, and be printed.

A BILL

to authorize the establishment of a library in the city of Washington for the use of government employees and other persons.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of the Interior be, and he is hereby, authorized and required to lease a suitable building in the city of Washington for a library and reading room for the employees of the government and other persons who shall desire to avail themselves of the benefits thereof, under the conditions hereinafter prescribed.

Sec. 2. And be it further enacted, That the books now in the possession of each and all of the executive departments of the government, and used as libraries for the clerks and employees, shall, immediately on the passage of this act, or as soon thereafter as he may signify his readiness to receive them, be turned over to the Secretary of the Interior or to some suitable person to be designated by him, who shall cause them to be deposited in the building provided for their reception, and properly arranged and classified.

Sec. 3. And be it further enacted, That the persons now employed in the various executive departments as librarians, shall, on the passage of this act, or within thirty days thereafter, prepare catalogues of the books under their charge, which shall be verified by the person designated by the Secretary of the Interior to receive them, and the employment of such persons as librarians shall then cease, and they

* 39th Congress, 2d Session, Senate 472.

shall be assigned to other duties by the head of the department to which they belong.

Sec. 4. And be it further enacted, That the said library and reading room shall be open to all persons for purposes of reference, free of cost, and each government employee in the District of Columbia, who shall desire to use any of the books at his or her residence, shall pay in advance to the librarian an annual tax of one dollar, and all other persons, resident in the District of Columbia, for the same privileges shall pay an annual tax of five dollars in advance. The library shall be open from ten o'clock in the morning until ten o'clock at night daily, except Sundays, and shall be under the direction and control of the Secretary of the Interior, who shall appoint one librarian, at an annual salary of two thousand dollars, who shall give a bond, *guaranteed by* two responsible residents of the District of Columbia, in the sum of five thousand dollars for the faithful discharge of his duties; one assistant librarian, at an annual salary of fifteen hundred dollars; and one messenger, at an annual salary of one thousand dollars. All moneys received by the librarian for subscriptions to said Library shall be credited to the library fund, and all expenses incurred shall be debited thereto and accounted for to the Secretary of the Interior, who shall make an annual report to Congress of the condition of the library, the amount of funds received, expended, and on hand, and such other information as he may deem it necessary to communicate.

Sec. 5. And be it further enacted, That the books in said library shall be loaned to subscribers for the same length of time and under the same restrictions as now prescribed for the library of congress, and any person who shall lose, mutilate, or destroy any of the books loaned shall pay to the librarian the full value thereof, or be denied the use of the library thereafter, or until payment as required shall be made. The Secretary of the Interior shall make such further regulations for the governance of the library and the safe custody and proper disbursement of its funds as he may deem necessary, and shall transmit a copy of such regulations with his annual report to Congress.

Sec. 6. And be it further enacted, That the sum of ten thousand dollars, or as much thereof as may be necessary, is hereby appropriated out of any money in the treasury not otherwise appropriated to enable the Secretary of the Interior to carry this act into effect, which amount, together with the funds received for subscriptions, shall be used for the maintenance of the library and for the payment of the expenses incident thereto.

The editor of the *Chronicle* (January 6, 1867) applauded the introduction of the Wilson bill, and emphasized the desirability of its passage by saying:

“In New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Chicago, St. Louis, and, in fact, every city of any size, a person can stroll into a quiet cozy hall, kept open from 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. and find all the famous foreign reviews, the London *Athenæum*, *Saturday Review*, and other leading exponents of foreign opinion, besides all the current weekly publications of the best standing. . . . Senator Wilson’s bill contemplates a consolidation of all the different small collections of books in the several departments into one good collection. Now, for instance, there are nearly 20,000 books in the Department of State; perhaps 3,000 to 4,000 in the two or three libraries of the Interior Department, and some few in the Treasury. In the Post Office Department there is no library at all; neither is there in the War, Navy, or Quartermaster’s Office. We could never understand why the twenty or thirty clerks of the State Department should have the free use of thousands of the best selected books of the national government while the clerks of the other bureaus and offices have none at all, and are not allowed any library privileges if they chance to be out of particular departments which keep up a collection of the newest and latest publications at the public expense. It does not seem like justice.”

The *Chronicle’s* support of the Wilson bill was as ineffectual as its support of the Ford’s Theater memorial movement.

A Government Clerks’ Association was, therefore, formed for the purpose of promoting this and other legislative measures of interest to government clerks. This association appears to have attempted, not the union of the department libraries in one public library, but the establishment of a public library to be composed of such miscellaneous works in the libraries of the departments as were seldom used by the officials of those departments.

On the nineteenth of November, 1867, the Government Clerks’ Association held a meeting at their rooms,

416 Seventh Street, D. W. Kelsey, president, in the chair, John W. Hogg, secretary. The committee appointed to prepare a memorial to be presented to Congress, asking that a library be established, accessible to all clerks, submitted a report, which, after some little debate, was adopted.

The librarian of the Treasury Department, S. Yorke Atlee, Esq., made a statement of the number of books in the Treasury library. There were some 2,000 volumes, of which but one-fourth were loaned out. From January 1 to October 31 he had loaned 4,180 books to 748 clerks, of whom 587 were gentlemen and 161 were ladies. There were 3,000 Treasury Department employees, of whom but one-fourth were able to obtain any books from the library. Mr. Fletcher, acting chief clerk of the Agricultural Bureau, presented some books to the association.*

At a meeting of the Government Clerks' Association, December 17, 1867, the committee appointed to solicit the aid of Congress and of the heads of departments in establishing a library, made a verbal report. They had already received the assent of four heads of departments and expressed the hope that they would before long obtain the object they had in view.†

The failure of the Lincoln memorial plan, of the Wilson bill and of the clerks' movement, was followed by the revival of the old Washington Library, brought about by its union with the Y. M. C. A. in November, 1869. The *Chronicle* accordingly abandoned its support of the free library movement, concluding that it was better to support the old library than to try any longer to secure a new one.‡ The *National Republican*, however, stood out still for a free public library.§

* *National Republican*, November 21.

† *National Republican*, December 18.

‡ *Chronicle*, November 12, 1872.

§ *National Republican*, November 13, 1872.

The introduction of the Jenkes bill providing for the transfer of the copyright collection from the Patent Office to the library of Congress, however, presented another for the establishment of a free public library. This was pointed out in the following letter to the *Chronicle*, dated April 16, 1870, and signed "C. C. S.":

"By law three copies of every book copyrighted are sent to Washington; one for the Congressional library, one for the Smithsonian, and one for the Patent Office collection, which has just been unearthed or ungarreted by Mr. Jenkes. As the Smithsonian library has been turned over to the Congressional, the addition of the Patent Office collection would give some forty thousand volumes to the Congressional, of each of which it already possesses two copies. Now, why cannot these extra forty thousand volumes be formed into a library for the people, not of Washington alone, but of the entire country, as represented by the tens of thousands who are directly or indirectly brought to this city in consequence of its position as capital of the country."*

The end of the decade 1865-1875 was marked, as the beginning had been, by the suggestion that a memorial free library be established. In 1865 it was a memorial to Lincoln that was contemplated. Now it was a memorial to that other great champion of emancipation, Charles Sumner, that was suggested. On March 11, 1874, Sumner died at his home in Washington. On the fourth of April E. J. L. wrote to the *Chronicle* suggesting that a memorial to Sumner should properly be erected by the colored race, and that it might well take the form of a library. The negro, he urged, had shown his appreciation of primary education, but the opportunities for continued study afforded by a public library were also needed. The cost of a monument or statue spent in books to form the nucleus of a library would

* *Chronicle*, April 28, 1870.

be forever a means of higher education both to the people for whose rights Sumner had fought, and to all residents of Washington. Before many years sufficient money could be raised to erect a fire-proof building for the library. Then colored people would have the most fitting memorial for the man who was not only their best friend, but America's best scholar. "But if, instead of this," he concluded, "a monument is built, those who decide upon that way of showing their gratitude may sometime hear the reproach, 'We asked for bread and you gave us a stone.'"

Mr. Watterston's plan for the transfer of the Washington Library to the public in 1849, the schemes for ward and parish libraries, the hopes from Mr. Corcoran, before the War; the proposition for a Lincoln memorial in 1865, the bill providing for a consolidation of the department libraries in 1866, the plans of the Clerks' Association regarding the same in 1867, the suggestion regarding the use of the copyright collection, the Sumner memorial; all had come to naught.

Nor was anything more done toward the establishment of a free public library until 1886. The history of the workingmen's library movement of that year and of the free library movement of the last decade of the century belongs to another chapter.